

Marines distributing meals-ready-to-eat.



U.S. Navy (Marjie Shaw)

# A Time for Conversion Chaplains and Unified Commanders

By BRADFORD E. ABLESON

**T**he genius of the American system is that it ensures freedom of religion for those desiring to exercise their faith as well as freedom from religion for those without interest. The commander bears a responsibility for providing servicemembers with the opportunity to freely exercise religion under the first amendment. Until recently, however, military

leaders could ignore religious matters external to the Armed Forces with relative impunity. That is no longer the case, for religion on the operational level transcends the needs of military personnel. Indeed, unified commanders are faced with a pluralistic and volatile world where religion represents a significant force.

The complexity of religion in various areas of responsibility is underscored by conspicuous failures in the past. It is acknowledged, for instance, that the Iranian revolution of 1979 caught the world unprepared largely because most people did not expect nations to embrace fundamentalism. But recognizing Islam as a volatile force did not

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**M**ilitary chaplaincies in the Armed Forces predate the founding of the Nation. Chaplains served in the Continental Army and Navy and played a continuing role in every war and most other conflicts since 1775. Chaplaincies in the Army, Navy (which also minister to the Marine Corps and Coast Guard), and Air Force provide for the free exercise of religion under the first amendment.

Chaplains must have an accredited undergraduate degree and a three-year master of divinity degree (or academic equivalent). Each is an ordained or certified minister drawn from one of over a hundred faith groups that are registered to provide chaplains. Endorsement by a recognized faith group is also required.

Each service provides professional training from the basic through field grade and senior levels. The Goldwater-Nichols Act exempted chaplains from joint manpower considerations; thus there are no joint professional military education requirements for chaplaincies. Accordingly, each service differs regarding education for chaplains serving with unified commands and JTFs. **JFQ**

preclude subsequent events that were regrettable. For example, in 1991 the Air Force dropped meals-ready-to-eat containing pork to starving Kurds, who were embittered by what was seen as a cruel dilemma—go hungry or violate religious dietary laws. Ironically, rations without pork could have been dropped. Islam

### **Joint Pub 1-05 fails to distinguish the responsibilities of chaplains with regard to the levels of war**

became more than a matter of public relations in Somalia when Bengali troops hesitated in providing fire support for American forces because they did not know if a *fatwah* (an Islamic legal ruling) had been issued authorizing an attack on their fellow Muslims.

It is clear in light of the increasing stakes that commanders should take religion seriously in using the range of tools available to them. Religious issues and their implications are examined by diverse staff elements, including intelligence, information operations, psychological operations, and unified command chaplains, who are the principal advisors on religious matters.

Unfortunately, there are difficulties that undercut support by chaplains. Senior billets for joint chaplains are justified on the basis of advice they give to commanders, yet poorly formulated doctrine virtually ensures that commanders are provided with little guidance on what to expect from chaplains. The problem is exacerbated by a tendency of the service chaplaincies to produce senior officers who are more attuned to meeting the needs for free exercise and accommodation of religion than advising senior commanders on religious issues. The time for change is now. Three

issues require speedy and dramatic improvement: doctrine and policy, expectation baselines for unified command chaplains, and personnel management and training.

### **Doctrine and Policy**

Joint Pub 1-05, *Religious Ministry Support for Joint Operations*, is inadequate. It fails to:

- deal with religion beyond accommodation issues for U.S. personnel
- provide a meaningful framework for religious analysis in an area of operation
- distinguish the responsibilities of chaplains with regard to the levels of war; thus the same duties are assumed for unified command and battalion-level chaplains
- define the relationships among unified command, joint task force, and supporting service element chaplaincies.

In fact, this publication was not intended for unified commanders—it is a handbook for chaplains. Thus commanders have no doctrine on which to base expectations of chaplains on the operational level. This lack of clarity is not confined to one publication. When religious issues arise, the role of chaplains often goes unmentioned. In Joint Pub 3-07, *Military Operations Other Than War*, Joint Pub 3-07.3, *Peace Keeping Operations*, and Joint Pub 3-57, *Civil Affairs*, religion is discussed but the function of chaplains is not articulated. This deficiency enables chaplains to fashion their roles. According to Captain M.R. Ferguson, USN, staff chaplain to the Chairman:

*Chaplains are unpredictable. . . . [Commanders] tell me they hold their breath as the new chaplain reports aboard. This is also indicative of the moral/morale impact a chaplain can have on a command, which is for better or worse. This helps explain why [commanders] will often insert themselves into the assignment process with firm, by-name requests. Because they perceive the quality base as so uneven and unpredictable, they're not sure what they're going to get.*

Given this lack of guidance, it is no surprise that the quality of chaplaincy offered to unified commanders varies dramatically. A chaplain who is professional will provide outstanding service. Conversely, one without such qualities may define his role in minimalist terms and exert virtually no influence. Ferguson observed that unified command chaplains span the spectrum from optimal performers to underachieving house pastors, whose efforts are confined to headquarters, providing services that could be delivered by junior officers. Unified command chaplains who fail to provide religious advisory support create a void that non-chaplain colleagues must fill.





National Guard Bureau (Tom Roberts)

Army National Guard chaplain at Ground Zero in New York.

An important first step is establishing a consistent set of standards to enable commanders to know what to expect and, as a result, what to demand from chaplains. In turn, this effort will also serve as a benchmark. The most effective way to professionalize is by formalizing the precepts of joint ministry through a revision of Joint Pub 1-05. At a minimum, this new publication should:

- articulate and link expectations of chaplains to the level of war for which their reporting seniors are responsible
- require unified command chaplains to function beyond the mere provision and facilitation role in order to become strategic/operational assets to the unified commanders
- define relationships between chaplains in the joint force hierarchy
- create a meaningful framework for religious analysis within the region
- include and codify mandatory functions and tasks to ensure that unified commanders are optimally served.

This task is compounded by the fact that doctrine will have to be developed from scratch. Defining performance standards may be one of the easiest aspects of the Joint Pub 1-05 revision. Experienced chaplains—incumbents and former billet holders—are available to draft a document. Under the aegis of the CJCS chaplain, position descriptions could be quickly written and vetted by U.S. Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) to help action officers in revising the publication.

Delineation of chaplain duties by level of war will be more difficult. Chaplains have a long history of functioning on the tactical level, and most service chaplaincies train to that tier. In

most areas, religious ministry for personnel is provided by chaplains organic to units chopped to unified commanders. A void exists between unified and tactical commanders. No one chaplain can hope to convey the intent of unified commanders on myriad religious and chaplain-related issues without effective intermediaries. This reality makes JTF chaplains key assets, but their roles are ill defined. Unlike tactical-level billets that are mastered in the course of a career, these positions frequently are filled arbitrarily by inadequately prepared individuals. Once assigned, neophytes find no rulebook to review, scarce training to draw upon, and few predecessors to consult. Though some learn on the job to become outstanding performers, their successes can be attributed more to personal talent than to a system designed to produce excellence.

The chaplain of U.S. European Command (EUCOM), for instance, observes that deficits in doctrine and training make JTF chaplains a weak link in his area. Formulating standards—many of which will be applied in a joint capacity for the first time—is critical and should be immediately tasked to JFCOM. In addition to formulating required functions and tasks, there is a pressing need to facilitate a training continuum for chaplains. The logical place for training to be administered is at the Joint Warfighting Center where JTF staffs are prepared prior to deployment. If that training operated as a stand-alone activity, it would produce a pool from which qualified individuals could be selected. In addition, it would reach chaplains before assuming duties with unified commands and JTFs. Optimally, however, they would train with the task force staffs on which they would eventually serve.

### Expectation Baselines

Commanders should be able to look to the unified command chaplain for a mastery of the religious issues within a region as a baseline expectation. Such a skill set must transcend the mere provision and facilitation of worship for personnel. It should also entail:

- the ability to analyze conflicts for religious content
- the ability to advise commanders on mitigation of religiously-charged scenarios
- comprehensive knowledge of religion in the area before hostilities commence
- the coordination and execution of religious engagement efforts.

The first baseline expectation is the ability to analyze. Unified command chaplains must be able to assess regional conflicts to determine which are patently religious, which are not religious, and which, although not primarily religious, could ignite into a so-called holy war.



Conducting service,  
USS Kitty Hawk.

USS Kitty Hawk (William H. Ramsey)

It is routinely claimed that more people have perished in the name of God than for any other cause; yet instead of confirming the frequency of religious warfare, that assertion reflects a human penchant to eulogize war dead in ultimate terms.

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The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the bloodiest in history, but most victims did not die in religious conflicts. Yet theological language became the currency of the bereaved. This tendency is reflected by national leaders in almost every war. Thus it is important to understand that despite the appeal to religious rhetoric, most conflicts are nonsectarian.

There are essentially three types of war. The first has a primarily religious component. Although it involves contested land, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict serves as a stark example. The explosion of violence since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the extent to which passions on both sides follow religious lines even outside the region indicate a strong sectarian component. Such holy wars are very difficult to manage, and when hostilities affect U.S. interests the response will require the application of all elements of national power.

Another type of war is not religious at all despite the use of religious vernacular. The strife in Northern Ireland, for instance, is portrayed in theological terms but is devoid of theological issues. It would be a mistake for any nation to view such conflicts as holy wars. Indeed, wars are seldom religious when the issue is which ethnic groups will govern their neighbors. Unified commanders should approach nonsectarian clashes of conflicting interests understanding that religious monikers often mask a conspicuous lack of religious content.

The third type of conflict is not primarily religious but contains a religious component with a potential to mobilize nationalist and ethnic passions. Examples include Afghanistan, Chechnya, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kosovo, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Sudan. Such wars may involve sites with religious significance to combatants. Chaplains who advise commanders face challenges because mishandling such issues could incite religious clashes, changing the dynamic of the conflict.

This consideration raises a second baseline of expectation for unified command chaplains, advising on mitigating religiously-charged events. Invoking the term *crusade* to describe actions against terrorism after 9/11 was unfortunate. No other term has overtones that mobilize as much anti-Western sentiment across the pan-Arabic world. Chaplains must ensure that commanders and staffs are aware of trip wires while lowering the religious quotient in the conflict.

Following an act of terrorism, chaplains should discern the level of solidarity between the religious community and terrorists by providing an informed view of the dynamic between religion and so-called religious terrorism to enable commanders to make nuanced assessments.

Unified command chaplains can lower volatility in theater by analyzing religious polity and its implications. One example on the strategic level occurred in the opening days of the global war against terrorism. The appeal to the rhetoric of holy war by terrorists led some in the Pentagon to appeal to just war theory by exploiting Muslim disapproval of attacks on the West. Specifically, it included soliciting *fatwahs* in support of American military efforts. The CJCS chaplain argued that such a notion was futile at best and explosive at worst. Because Islam lacks a central judiciary, he stated that any U.S.-issued *fatwah* would be discredited by radical elements in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Moreover, the United States would theologize the war along divisive lines to the detriment of coalition efforts. While such reasoning appears sound in retrospect, it was viewed as noncooperative by those who conceived the idea as a brilliant information operation.



Chaplain of the Marine Corps with the fleet.

15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Matthew J. Decker)

The third baseline for chaplains must be a knowledge of the religions within a given region prior to hostilities. Yet in a pluralistic context, such as EUCOM which encompasses 93 nations, it is virtually impossible for an officer to master the religious dynamics without drawing on extensive resources. Vital assistance is found in missions where embassy personnel understand the religion, folklore, and issues of contention in the country.

Chaplains should monitor the pulse of an area through relations, under the direction of the combatant command, with American embassies selected in view of theater-strategic considerations. Moreover, they should speak with designated local points of contact regularly. Defense attachés are acceptable, but a better choice would be political counselors, who are tasked to interpret local attitudes toward the United States. Although formalized relationships with every mission would be impractical, unified command chaplains should monitor annual human rights reports.

Moreover, given regional differences, chaplains must be prepared to address issues ranging from mortuary practices to bombardment on holy days. For instance, in conducting the global war on terrorism, questions arose on continuing military operations during Ramadan. Leaders should consider what Muslims have done in

such situations. History reveals many operations carried out by Muslims. During Ramadan, for instance, Mohammed captured Mecca, Egypt and Syria began a war with Israel in 1973, and Iran and Iraq fought in the 1980s. More recently, NATO bombed Serbia on Orthodox feast of Easter. That decision will be judged by history, but the Serbs noted that the only other enemy to bomb them on Easter was Germany during World War II.

Coordination and execution of religious engagement is the fourth baseline of effectiveness. It enhances goodwill among allies and neutrals and creates more informed chaplains to advise their commanders. A review of theater plans for all unified commands, however, reveals conspicuously few religious activities of this kind.

Unified command chaplains should be fully integrated into the theater engagement planning management information system, which tracks the way nations within the region are engaged. Military-to-military contact by chaplains, international chaplaincy conferences, and coordination of humanitarian assistance are a few such initiatives. Using religion for engagement can strengthen ties with allies and facilitate a thaw with former enemies. The EUCOM command chaplain, for instance, recently organized an event with participation from Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Armenia, and Estonia.



**in addition to what chaplains should do, there is also the matter of what they should not do**

In addition to what unified command chaplains should do, there is also the matter of what they should not do. First, they must maintain their noncombatant status. They should not be assigned duties such as planning information or psychological operations. Insights on religion can have utility in a conflict, but chaplains should not be involved in translating that expertise into acts of war. Similarly, they may learn things that are pertinent to staff intelligence needs (for example, that Muslim allies may be hesitant to kill Muslim enemies without a *fat-wah*). Yet the chaplain must never become, or be perceived to be, an intelligence operative.

Second, one must distinguish between ministerial duties which have utility for information operations and those which do not. When Taliban prisoners moved to Camp X-ray at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, a Muslim chaplain was ordered to the facility. This Navy chaplain conducted normal duties as a Muslim cleric, including daily prayers over the camp loudspeaker system, and the story received widespread press coverage. No doubt the entire situation was regarded as an information operations and public affairs coup. Yet it was acceptable because the chaplain performed standard religious duties at a military installation. If asked to counsel prisoners and report to camp officials, however, his activities would have been illegal, unethical, and overall highly detrimental.

### **Management and Training**

To improve the performance of chaplains, management and training must be dramatically improved. As indicated, joint doctrine fails to articulate clear distinctions in the duties of chaplains. Formulating responsibilities on each level is a first step. Unified command chaplains must be able to function on the strategic and operational levels. JTF chaplains must be qualified to perform on the operational level while unit chaplains serve on the tactical level. The latter will rightly focus on troops, but benefit can be derived from guidance on the area provided by unified commanders and JTF chaplains. These responsibilities should also be listed in the joint mission essential task list to enable mission-to-task formulations and corresponding training to be developed and required.

Assignment policy also merits consideration. Joint billets are designated as either rotational or service specific. At command and staff level, billets rotated among chaplaincies on a three-year

basis include positions with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and U.S. Central, European, Special Operations, Southern, and Northern Commands, while the chaplains at U.S. Joint Forces and Pacific Commands are always naval officers. This structure is problematic for the two latter commands because their chaplains simultaneously serve as the fleet chaplains for U.S. Atlantic and Pacific Fleets, respectively. The charter of unified command chaplains cannot be fulfilled on a part-time basis, no matter how talented the assignee.

The systemic flaws that undercut religious support by chaplains to unified commanders are compounded by their lack of training requirements. Other than seniority there are no prerequisites. Phase I joint professional education should be mandatory and those without Phase II should attend the Joint Forces Staff College en route to command assignments. Chaplains who are flag officers should advocate these standards when convened as members of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board. Absent such standards, requirements for chaplains should be set at the CJCS level.

Finally, because of the cultural and religious nuances found in various regions, prospective unified command chaplains should be sent to the Foreign Service Institute, which offers two-week courses on every country in the world. Attendance could help ensure a more prepared chaplain and a better-served commander.

Despite the implications of religion for operations, commanders do not enjoy support from chaplains who are assigned as their primary advisors on such matters. Flawed joint doctrine offers inadequate guidance on what to expect. To make matters worse, the only qualifications for serving as a unified command chaplain are seniority and a nomination from the service chief of chaplains. The resources exist to correct the problem and radically enhance the quality of support: changes in joint doctrine and reformulation of training requirements. These changes will enable commanders to know what they should expect and chaplains to know what they should provide. **JFQ**

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